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ABSTRACT

Two studies of a total of 17 preadolescent emotionally disturbed children were undertaken to observe children's reflective and naturalistic social cognition, and to utilize a developmental sequence of levels of interpersonal understanding to evaluate the interpersonal problem solving skills of emotionally disturbed children. Individual interviews were conducted and group meetings were held in small classrooms where the children's discussion centered on common conflicts such as teasing, scapegoating, and distribution of group rewards. Results showed that children's level of reflective social cognition obtained during individual interviews about hypothetical events was at a higher level than their real life interpersonal problem solving. It is concluded that peer pressure, situational anxiety and frustration, which are more prevalent in a group context, may compromise the abilities children express in reflective interviews. (Author/PHR)

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Reflective and Naturalistic Social Cognition: Social Cognition and Interpersonal Problem-Solving Among Emotionally Disturbed Children

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BACKGROUND

Much of our knowledge of children's social development has come from research in the area of social cognitive development. A broad range of content areas including moral judgment (Kohlberg, 1969), beliefs about social customs (Turiel, 1975), perspective-taking (Selman, 1971), and interpersonal understanding (Selman & Jaquette, 1977; Selman, Jaquette, & Lavin, 1977), has been studied using in-depth interviews with children at various ages. Results show evidence of developmental progression in children's social cognition and provide a rich source for understanding social development. In general, our energies have been put toward mapping out the formal sequence of social cognitive development. To do this we have generally relied on hypothetical and reflective interviews in which we can probe the meaning of the child's concepts using a variety of clinical techniques. We find the reflective interview method extremely useful for mapping out the child's social conceptions. However, at some point we must ask ourselves many of the functional questions about how the child utilizes his social cognition in his daily social interactions and the relationship between his social conception and his nonverbal behavior. At this point our reflective interview technique becomes a liability.

In the reflective interview, a subject meets with an interviewer in a one-to-one situation carefully structured to reduce anxiety, minimize outside distraction, and promote optimal expression of social conceptions. The interviewer either introduces a hypothetical situation or begins by asking structured questions. Structured questions are followed by open-ended probes which help refine the child's meaning. One possible drawback of this method is that it may provide more a measure of social cognitive competence under optimal conditions than a measure of real-life performance (Brown & Hernstein, 1975).

Two aspects of the interview approach differ from what might be considered naturalistic performance. First, the content of questions usually pertains to distant or hypothetical situations rather than the spontaneous problems of children. Second, the context of the interview is generally a private, one-to-one setting, rather than the group context in which children use their social reasoning. Because of its "unnatural" content and context, the reflective interview is often only marginally relevant to the conditions under which most people normally utilize their cognitive ability. A method which ignores the performance factors of anxiety, frustration, or peer pressure in children's social cognition hardly reflects an accurate picture of social development. For this reason we need to develop strategies for observing how the child applies his social cognitive abilities in naturalistic settings, to examine whether the formal sequence applies to real-life reasoning and at what level the individual operates in different settings.

What, then, is the status of naturalistic methods for assessing social cognition? One approach has been to design hypothetical interviews about more immediate and salient features of the child's social world thereby increasing the validity of the cognitive content. For example, standard Kohlberg moral dilemmas have been altered to reflect children's real-life concerns (Damon, 1977). However, the content of the dilemma is imposed on the subject and does not represent the spontaneous conflicts and resolutions of real-life reasoning. In addition, the context is still the one-to-one interview between a facilitating interviewer and a generally motivated subject; hardly a naturalistic setting.

A second approach is Kohlberg's assessment of moral atmosphere (Kohlberg, Sharf, & Hickey, 1972). An interview is conducted about the justice and community concerns with some member of a naturalistic organization such as a school or prison. In looking at the assessment context and content, we see an increase in "real-life" quality of the interview content, because the problem-solving activity represents the spontaneous concerns of a natural community.

least once a week, in which students would bring up common interpersonal problems such as teasing, sharing, and disruptive behavior, for discussion and group action (Jaquette, forthcoming). In two separate studies (Jaquette, 1978; Lavin, 1979), the social cognitive abilities represented by levels of interpersonal awareness (Selman & Jaquette, 1977; 1978) were observed in both reflective interviews and naturalistic problem-solving activity. In Study I (Jaquette, 1978),eight pre-adolescents were observed in their interpersonal problem-solving for an entire school year. In Study II,nine slightly younger children were observed using similar procedures for six months (Lavin, 1979). Such small samples of emotionally disturbed children do not constitute a representative sample from which to make generalizations. However, case-study findings do have relevance beyond this narrow population if one views "disturbed" children's naturalistic reasoning as a more striking example of social thought processes which might be found in normal children. We have also found the discrepancy between a child's reflective competency and problem-solving performance to be an enlightening indication of social maturity and ego strength among a clinically-referred population.

Both studies used essentially the same class meeting procedures. Lasting from 15 minutes to one hour, class meetings utilized the existing interpersonal conflicts, individual personalities, and group goals as the basis for discussion. Discussion stressed action resolutions whereby the class would be able to act on group decisions, for example, by writing a petition to address some common grievance. Class meetings had a relatively strong structure with class leaders, discussion guidelines, a student-initiated agenda, and debate and voting procedures. Meetings were presided over by student leaders selected for two-week periods on a rotating basis. Each meeting began with a joint rating of group cooperation which served to sensitize the group members to important interpersonal concerns. Discussion next moved to suggestions accumulated during the week in a suggestion box.

The class leader read each suggestion and asked for comments and possible resolutions from other members. The class meeting procedures stressed the student's responsibility for discussing and resolving their interpersonal conflicts. The conflicts were spontaneous and emotionally-charged. For example, the groups often confronted students on their disruptive behavior. One child with a critically ill nephew was given both support and insight into his acting-out behavior. As researchers, we were often caught between providing students with an unrestricted group context for observing their interpersonal problem-solving and intervening on the basis of our clinical judgments as to the individual's emotional status.

To code naturalistic interpersonal awareness, each class meeting was audio-tape recorded and transcribed. Using the stage criteria developed from extensive reflective interviews (Selman & Jaquette, 1977), and a special procedure for scoring statements in a group context (Jaquette, 1978), levels of interpersonal awareness were assigned to individual statements. For each class meeting, each participating individual received a Naturalistic Interpersonal Awareness (NIA) score which was a mean stage for all his responses. Several problems were encountered in coding naturalistic social cognition from group discussions. Many of the children's comments were highly idiosyncratic with meaning only to those who participated in the discussion. This required the scorer to have an anthropologist's familiarity with the class. Because the scoreable material came from spontaneous discussion, it was often difficult to decide where one score ended and another began. The most critical problem was that of giving stage judgments to responses which did not have the advantage of follow-up probes available within a reflective interview to clarify the meaning. Despite these difficulties, a high degree of interrater reliability was obtained. Of seven group discussions coded by both scorers, the average Pearson correlation was .93.

The kinds of statements made during the interpersonal problem-solving discussions were very similar to those found within the reflective interview format in which the conflict is only hypothetical. For example, when attempting to resolve a tie vote for class leader, one student gave the following suggestion:

> Then we let them have a fight. Whoever wins is the president. . . and I'll beat up Gary.

On our reflective interviews, young children often provide the same kind of conflict resolution based on physical intervention which is characteristic of the first level of interpersonal awareness. The preadolescent who made this remark was capable of more mature thinking. However, his jealousy over not being selected class leader resulted in this "acting-out" immature conception. Other parts of the interpersonal problem-solving sessions revealed the children's more mature conceptions based on their awareness of the psychological relationship of shared thoughts and feelings. Another child said:

> You are not supposed to tell us what to do. . . We are supposed to share our ideas and you are supposed to share your ideas with us.

His verbal articulation of "shared ideas" is characteristic of interpersonal awareness which would be minimally coded as our third level. Each group discussion provided an average of 32 codeable interpersonal awareness statements, with a range from 6 to 64 per session. While our procedures may have compressed natural social cognition into a smaller, more standardized time-frame, both staff and children indicated that the concerns expressed and coded were highly relevant to peer relations within the school.

In addition to a naturalistic score for each class meeting, children were also given a standard interpersonal awareness interview before class meetings began in the fall and after they were stopped in the spring. Each child received a mean naturalistic social cognition score based on the average of his/her class meetings. In order to compare reflective to naturalistic reasoning, a mean reflective social cognition score was computed as the average of the pre- and post-test interviews, thereby taking into account development which may have occurred over the course of the class meeting program.

RESULTS

Our initial interest was in comparing the level of children's reflective social cognition to their level of naturalistic social cognition. Because comparisons were between two measures obtained on the same individuals, matched t-tests were used. In both Study I and Study II, children's reflective social cognition as a group averaged about one-half stage higher than their naturalistic social cognition, a significant difference in both studies (Study I: $t=3.248(7)$, $p<0.01$; Study II: $t=6.478(8)$, $p<0.001$). As was expected, the real-life content and natural group context of children's naturalistic social cognition constrained their performance when compared to their reflective social cognitive abilities.

Given the discrepancy between children's naturalistic and reflective social cognition, much of our attention has been drawn to specifying the qualities of the naturalistic setting which seem to constrain the child's performance. To check if the difference was due to the real-life content of the problem-solving discussions, Study I assessed the developmental status of children's reasoning about real-life concerns in the class meeting, but within a reflective interview. These reflective interviews about real-life events were found to yield the same high level of social cognition as did the standard reflective interviews ($r=.97$), and were higher than the naturalistic social cognition utilized during class meetings ($t=3.528(7)$, $p<0.005$). This finding suggests that interviews about real-life events do not reflect the functional qualities of naturalistic social cognition which might be expressed in the act of actual problem-solving.

Our analysis of the impact of the group context alone remains unclear. In both Study I and II, group discussions were held about hypothetical and distant topics. In this condition, the content was primarily hypothetical, but the context was a natural peer group. In Study I, this hypothetical group discussion condition was similar to reflective social cognition and was higher than the children's naturalistic social cognition ($t=4.603(7)$, $p<0.005$). In Study II, however, the reasoning found in the hypothetical group discussion condition was similar to

naturalistic social cognition and lower than children's reflective social cognition ($t=3.55(8)$, $p = 0.007$). These results would suggest that the group context more than the real-life content may be a greater source for the discrepancy between reflective and naturalistic social cognition.

We have also been interested in the relationship between personality and naturalistic social cognition. For example, results from Study I suggest that impulsive, acting-out children are more likely to exhibit a large discrepancy between their reflective competencies and their naturalistic perforamnce. In Study II, a majority of the children showed a comparatively higher level of naturalistic social cognition when they were cast in the role of class leader than when they were merely participants. This suggests that factors such as social roles of responsibility-taking or a child's self-esteem may be related to level of naturalistic social cognition.

Because naturalistic social cognition was measured over several sessions, we have had the opportunity to observe the effects of time of the year on naturalistic social cognition. Time series analyses conducted on Study I reveal a strikingly consistent developmental progression over two-thirds of the school year, with a dramatic termination regression effect during the last third. It may be that the emotional turmoil brought on by the impending separation from significant teachers and counselors influences the maturity of children's interpersonal problem-solving (Jaquette, 1979).

CONCLUSIONS

The studies reported here suggest a much-needed trend toward the observation and analysis of social cognition as it is used in the child's everyday social interactions. It is hardly surprising that peer pressure, situational anxiety and frustration, which are more prevalent in a group context, may compromise the abilities children express in reflective interviews. The ecological validity of social cognition research is greatly increased when it reflects the real-life

social reasoning children bring to bear in their everyday transactions with adults and peers.

This approach also helps to bridge the gap between social cognitive research and clinical and educational practice. The kind of interpersonal problem-solving which occurred during our class meetings is a fundamental part of children's social development. The children of the Manville School often lack even the most rudimentary skills in solving their own interpersonal problems without frustration, anger and violence. An intervention which gives troubled children the chance to develop their social reasoning skills as applied to real-life problems may be more on target than one which aims to change some ambiguous social cognitive "ability" as if this were a stable trait. Clinicians and educators have long been aware of the differences betwen children's social maturity in peer groups and one-to-one adult centered interviews (Redl & Wineman, 1952). Measures of social cognition, if they can be geared to tap spontaneous problem-solving activity within a naturalistic context, can provide the practitioner with a better barometer of social development.

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